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ABSTRACT

The senior seminar course in speech communication at Ripon College (Wisconsin) helps students to draw together their educational experiences and to focus on the task of planning for immediate and long-term career goals. In its initial year, it was taught in a two-semester sequence. The first semester focused on the discipline and the profession and on career planning through two series of individual presentations followed by a group discussion format. Out-of-class work involved working on a first draft of the seminar paper. The second semester focused on interviewing and preparing resumes. Students were graded on their individual and group presentations and their final paper and oral presentation. In the future, the career discussion will be more clearly divided into distinct phases. Course planners also intend to introduce junior and senior communication majors to the topic of career planning and to campus computer facilities. Finally, the supportive atmosphere provided by the structure and small size of the class and Ripon College itself has been a big plus in the course. (JL)

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SENIOR SEMINAR: SYNTHESIS AND HEAD START

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SENIOR SEMINAR: SYNTHESIS AND HEAD START

Ripon College, in company with most small, private, Liberal Arts institutions, has been caught in the pull of job training versus liberal learning as it endeavors to maintain financial stability in the current "hard times" for educational institutions. For a variety of reasons it seems to be weathering the financial crisis reasonably well, and the college remains committed to the traditional principles of liberal learning rather than shifting its emphasis to courses and majors which appear to have more practical employment-assuring value. Yet responses can occur within the Liberal Arts context which will help students to draw together their educational experiences and to focus on the task of planning for immediate and long term career goals after they leave the educational institution. The Senior Seminar course in Speech Communication at Ripon College is such a response. It can serve as a model for such courses at similar institutions, and it can suggest ideas which might be implimented at other institutions. This is a consideration of how the senior seminar came about, how it was structured in its initial year, and how it will be expanded and modified in the future.

Background and Goals of the Senior Seminar

Ripon College is an institution of some 900 students, 70 faculty members, and more than 130 years of Liberal Arts tradition. Speech Communication is one of the few interdisciplinary majors at the college; for the major students take 28 semester credits of speech communication courses and 3 courses in selected areas outside the

department, in their choice of the humanities, the behavioral and social sciences, or English. There is a combined Speech-Drama department of three full-time faculty members but one faculty member is responsible for teaching all of the speech communication courses. For the past several years grant support has provided for a part-time debate coach who has also taught one of the speech courses each semester, but his presence continues to be dependent upon outside funding.

Many departments at Ripon College have had a comprehensive examination as part of their requirements for a major in the department. Speech and Drama have used an oral format for their comprehensive examinations, with mixed results. Often the quality of the answers depended upon the quality of the questions, and faculty members found themselves doing as much preparation as the students for the exams, on top of already full teaching loads. The pass-fail grading was not always satisfactory, the exams were difficult to schedule, and there was an ambiguity about form, purpose, and content of the orals which frustrated faculty and students alike. Speech took the first step toward significant change several years ago when it required its students to make an approximately 20 minute presentation of a paper as part of the orals, with questions by the Speech-Drama faculty to relate to the content of the paper and the relationship of that content to course work within the department.

The department has also had a major requirement of at least one year's participation in the co-curricular activity program of the department, in the case of speech to provide additional public speaking experience for the speech majors. This has often been a drain on the time and energy of the student and the coach alike, if real interest in participation was not high, and also a drain on the financial resources of the program.

It seemed a better way could be devised to provide the capstone experience the senior orals should have been, and to provide the public speaking experience that the forensic participation had been providing. After evaluating both experiences

the senior seminar was substituted for both requirements. It was to have the continuing goals of providing these experiences, and the added goal of providing assistance to the speech majors in career planning--a need which had heretofor been met by the department only informally in advising sessions with individual students.

The course was a tremendous success. It not only met the three practical and immediate goals cited above, but it also encouraged the synthesis of content in previous courses within the speech communication major and throughout the college--one of the goals of the Liberal Arts at Ripon; it helped to serve as a review and to fill in any gaps in the programs of individual students because of their taking some of the offerings in speech and not others and because of the sequence and timing of their taking the courses; and very importantly it fostered a marvelous esprit de corps and group identity among the speech communication majors and provided a highly supportive atmosphere for their ventures into the job application and interview process. (I should note that while courses and jobs were the focus of some students, a number had graduate school as their immediate goal. The same principles applied to both groups. and the same support was felt for law school or other graduate school decisions as was felt while making decisions about employment immediately upon graduation). All the students enthusiastically expressed increased confidence in their career planning goals and procedures, and a stronger sense of their understanding of their major as a major rather than a series of courses with some overlapping content and focus.

Course Structure and Content

The course was required in a two semester sequence, one credit each semester. It was decided first semester to meet for two hours every other week, and after examining all their schedules the students chose 7:15 on alternating Tuesday MORNINGS as the best time to meet. (Attendance was better at this class than at

other speech classes meeting later in the morning, and often including some of these same students!) Coffee and donuts were on hand for the sessions. There were eight students in the class.

First semester focused on the discipline and the profession, and on career planning. The students also prepared first drafts of their seminar papers. Second semester involved further career planning information and the presentation of the papers. Textbooks for first semester included THE THREE BOXES OF LIFE and WHAT COLOR IS YOUR PARACHUTE, by Richard N. Bolles and a reader of contemporary articles about speech communication. Second semester textbooks included WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE WITH MY LIFE by Richard N. Bolles and John C. Crystal and a module on interviewing.

The students handled all the class presentations individually or in groups assigned by the instructor, who chose all topics and structured the assignments. All presentations were given formally as speeches or group discussions, although informal discussion followed each.

First Semester. There was first a series of individual presentations, in the form of informative speeches, dealing with the profession and the discipline. They included considerations of the distant and recent history of the discipline, where the discipline seems to be going, mutual concerns of people in speech communication and the humanities and the social sciences (two presentations), the history and organization of the Speech Communication Association and the services it provides its members, possible careers in speech communication, and graduate schools offering degrees in speech communication.

A second series of presentations focused on selections from the reader, again presented as informative or persuasive speeches followed by informal discussion. The students expressed and displayed a much clearer perspective of speech communication after these sessions. They were able to utilize ideas and information from many of their other courses, speech and otherwise, in the discussions, making them

lively and well grounded.

We next turned to career planning and used a group discussion format; the class was divided into several groups of four people and each did two presentations utilizing material from the Bolles books. They involved the class in exercises based on the books, in which each person used himself or herself as the reference point. I happened to have a good friend in the Director of Career Planning at the college who, after hearing my description of the class, asked if she might sit in on the discussions, to learn how the students interpreted and reacted to the Bolles books. Her presence added much to the discussion and she provided an excellent resource for the group. We had one session within the career planning office, going over materials there, and found that by this introduction to the office and its director the students became much more frequent users of that office and its reference library than other students on campus. The classroom incorporation seemed to make a difference in the student perceptions of the office.

Out-of-class work for the students involved the students selecting their best (or favorite) paper from a previous class, and rewriting it as the basis of their seminar paper. They had had the option to prepare a new paper, but (predictably) none chose it. The students generally chose to reexamine and improve their theories of interpersonal communication or their position papers on ethics and responsibility in communication. One worked further with an independent study paper and one reconsidered an internship. Drafts of these papers were due at the end of the term.

Students were graded on their oral presentations, group projects, class discussions, and first drafts.

Second Semester. During the spring semester we again met two hours early in the morning, but we met every week for about the first six weeks. Three of these sessions focused on interviewing, and again the group presentation format was used. The students were both clever and perceptive in their presentations which ranged

from role plays to check lists. The last session considered the informational interview and each student was then given the assignment of contacting someone in a profession they were considering, doing background research and then an informational interview with that person, and then reporting back to the class in a month.

A session was held on preparing a resume and the student exchanged resumes for comments and suggestions, but by then the students all had planned their resumes with the assistance of the career planning director and most were into the interviewing process. It was suggested that resumes be covered first semester instead of second, and that the Bolles and Crystal book be used first semester if at all. It had a workbook format that the students could also use on their own.

The Director of Career Planning provided us with information on legal and illegal questions in job interviews and this led to a discussion of very difficult issues such as affirmative action, career conflict between couples, and the hard realities of life after college. This discussion was partly spontaneous, and was highly productive. By then the students knew each other, the instructor, and the Director of Career Planning, well, and self-disclosure was comfortable.

In the sixth session the informational interviews were reported on, and in the next six weeks individual students worked on the final drafts of their papers, meeting individually with the instructor. The two final class sessions, this time held in the late afternoon and open to all speech communication majors and any other interested persons, included the paper presentations and discussion.

Students were graded on their individual and group presentations and their final paper and oral presentation. A final informal feedback session on the seminar was held and several possible revisions emerged.

Modifications for Future Courses

Next year the career discussions will be more clearly divided into four phases.

The first will be a consideration of the meaning of career and life planning, using ideas from the works of Bolles, Alene Morris of the Individual Development Center, Inc., Seattle, and those who write on stages or cycles of one's life. The ongoing nature of career planning to meet natural life changes will be stressed. The instructor will present this introductory session.

The Bolles and possibly the Bolles and Crystal books will be used as they were in this first seminar, along with other exercises, to encourage and assist the students to begin to define their own career and life goals, the second phase. The Career Planning Office will be used as a reference center for information on specific careers and graduate schools, the third phase, and toward the end of the first semester and in the beginning of the second semester the focus will be on bringing the students and their career goals closer together--finding out about specifically available jobs, resumes, and interviews.

The students suggested that the topic of career planning be introduced to the junior majors in speech communication, and possibly eventually the sophomores. They recommended that as part of the second semester class the senior students themselves present a half-day workshop for the underclass majors, focusing on the Bolles books, informational interviews, the resources of the Career Planning Office, and resume writing. They felt the orgaization of such a workshop would be both good experience and an excellent review for themselves and that their friends would benefit from the information presented. By introducing some of these ideas early, first semester can incorporate several of the specific projects which had been assigned second semester--the informational interview and the resumes, for example. This would free up time second semester and we could extend our discussion of topics relevant to the discipline into second semester and invite several faculty members from outside the department to contribute to those sessions with us.

I also plan to give the junior and senior majors an introduction to the campus computer facilities, at least the text editor (word processor) program available to

them. I believe they all should have at least a little experience with a computer as part of their college experiences, and that this would be a useful skill for them to acquire. This, plus introductory ideas about career planning, would be introduced to students next year as part of one of their regular classes in speech communication.

A Side Benefit, Supportive Atmosphere

The speech communication majors at Ripon College have been a relatively cohesive group compared to most of the other majors at the college. The smaller number is in part responsible for this, plus the nature of the speech courses which involve many interpersonal exercises. Participation in departmental activities is a third factor which helps draw the students together, but even this factor did not bring about the sense of group identity and personal support that developed among the members of the senior seminar class. There was a concern extended to each member of the group through all the career planning exercises and discussions that was demonstrated in the students' reactions to each other's successes and failures in the job search. Acceptances to graduate schools and announcements of job offers were met with delight from the whole group; disappointments were shared. As the students partcipated in discussions about the field of speech communication they came to identify themselves very strongly as speech communication majors. The identity, the sense of group support, and the practical help the class provided gave our seniors both self confidence and important skills as they made their career decisions. They also had a more realistic perception of the factors involved in making career decisions and in being hired for a job. They better realized that such decisions and procedures would no doubt occur a number of times in their lives, and they felt more ready for them.

The Small College Environment

Throughout the whole experience we were aided by the size and atmosphere of Ripon College. We had a small and well-defined group of majors who knew each other and the instructor well and who were used to working together. We had the support of the Career Planning Office and the willingness of its Director to assist the class and individuals in many personal ways. We anticipate this same assistance next year from the Math and Computer Science Department and the Computer Center.

We had the freedom to experiment with the course content and format. We had the advantage of small classes and previous experiences throughout the college which permitted the students to take responsibility for the course content. Because of the breadth of the college curriculum and the requirement for its students to take courses in all areas, we were able to capitalize on interdisciplinary perspectives in our discussion of the discipline.

We were also able to realize one of the goals of the college, excellence in individual development. The final presentations were sophisticated and well done. The students had the opportunity to develop a paper over several semesters into a final presentation of which they, and the department, could be proud, and to present their papers for their colleagues and friends. They had the full resources of the college, and the full attention of the faculty and did not have to compete with graduate students or faculty research projects.

In the Senior Seminar we seemingly better accomplished important parts of the college's educational mission, "the growth and development of the individual members of its community" and the "development of humane understanding and the capacity for responsible inquiry."